

What it takes to be a successful online learner

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Online professional development for educators has gained in popularity because of its convenience and flexibility. Commuting time is eliminated, and you can check in to class when and where you'd like. There is a wide variety of online professional development opportunities available, ranging from short, self-paced tutorials focusing on a particular skill to full fledged degree programs. Quality varies greatly, and you should be an informed consumer, finding out about class size, amount of interaction, types of assignments, and getting feedback from former students.

As a case in point, consider the Lesley University online Technology in Education program which has an almost 100% retention and satisfaction rate. Students are pleased with the program for a number of reasons. A recent survey involved questioning current online students, graduates of the online degree program, and online instructors. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were used to gather input from over 400 individuals.

When asked what contributed to their satisfaction with the program, students noted the helpful "feedback from instructors," the "practical, interesting content," and "clearly defined directions and guidance from the instructor." It is significant to note that classes have a maximum of 15 students, emphasize

interaction and collaboration, and are project-based. Students often have the opportunity to customize class projects to be more relevant to their classroom situation.

Even in the highest quality online courses, students report a range of experiences, depending on their participation. There are ways of getting the most out of the learning opportunities and maximizing the online experience for yourself and your classmates. The guidelines listed below are a compilation of suggestions from students who describe engaging learning experiences and enjoy being a part of a learning community of colleagues. They also reflect recommendations from instructors who describe what it takes to get the most out of their courses:

1. Be prepared to be online, a lot.

The most successful online students check in several times a day and participate fully. There is a positive correlation between high achievement in online classes and frequent and focused participation. When online students travel, they usually carry lightweight laptops and know where they can access free wireless connections. If you have to be offline for more than a few days, make sure you alert your instructor and catch up with missed work quickly.

2. Anticipate technology needs.

The technology you use and the Internet service you subscribe to directly affect your efficiency and productivity. Purchase the best equipment and fastest connection you can afford, or do your work at a school, library, or other location that provides high quality access. Master the software you'll need with tutorials, online help, and connections with people who can assist you.

3. Write, and write well.

One of the advantages of online learning over traditional learning is that threaded, asynchronous discussions allow you time to carefully construct your thoughts before posting them. Take advantage of this opportunity. Spell and grammar check your responses, re-read and improve them, and post them when they accurately and eloquently reflect your thoughts. If there is online writing support available, such as free tutoring, take advantage of it.

4. Be a good citizen in the virtual community.

Students in online classes highly value the camaraderie and community they experience, whether it is in the informal forums or the more serious class discussions and collaborative work. Take the time to find supportive research, and discover relevant resources and share them with

your classmates. Do your part to contribute your own creative ideas. Make sure, though, that you also allow your more informal side to surface. Allow your sense of humor to emerge, share interesting aspects of your day-to-day life, and respond to the postings of your classmates with comments, suggestions, and, when needed, concern and empathy. This is a great suggestion but also should come with a caution of not revealing too much: Internet safety, whether for a college course or not, should be a priority!

5. Say what's on your mind.

In a traditional classroom, facial expressions and body language can communicate understanding, confusion, and other thoughts. No one can read your mind online. If you have questions, ask them. If you are concerned about other students, contact them. If you think you have a solution to a problem, contribute it. Be deliberate, and encourage others to be by responding to their questions and their requests for help.

6. Define your time and space and discipline yourself to protect it.

Successful online students are more self-disciplined than traditional students. The enemy of online students is procrastination. Keep track of assignment due dates and plan ahead. Carve out the time you'll need and the physical space that works for you. Set boundaries for yourself on how you will deal with distractions, for example: When you are working on class assignments, will you answer the phone or let it ring?

7. Don't overlook non-technological resources.

Take advantage of not only online information but also local libraries and

other resources. Be aware of learning opportunities in your community, whether it is the free workshops at your local computer store or local technology conferences. Seek out the people who can be helpful, the teachers in your school who have experience with a topic you are studying, or the neighbor or relative who has mastered the software you just purchased. Successful online learners are resourceful.

8. Enjoy the learning process.

Take every opportunity you can to customize an assignment so that it is more relevant to your professional position or valuable to your personal growth. Cultivate collegial relationships with classmates in the way you would in a face-to-face setting. Learn all you can from instructors who inspire and encourage you, not just from the content they teach but also from their teaching strategies and the attitude and tone they model.

A good online class is lively, interesting, and thought provoking. It is a safe environment where students can express themselves freely and feel supported, respected, and valued. It is a place where the instructor not only teaches but also facilitates discussion, organizes collaborative work, and provides feedback and support to students. When students respond regularly and provide creative ideas and additional content, the value of the class increases exponentially. If you follow the guidelines listed above, you can be an important contributor to the success of the class and a valued member of the online learning community. ♦♦